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978-0-521-81132-3 - Early Muslim Polemic Against Christianity: Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Incarnation"

Edited by David Thomas

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Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity

Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Incarnation"

The Muslim thinker Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq lived in ninth-century Baghdad. He is remembered for his extensive knowledge of non-Muslim religious communities and his unorthodox views on Islam itself. This book presents an edition and translation of Abū ʿĪsā's *Against the Incarnation*, the second and last part of his *Refutation of the Three Christian Sects*. It is edited and translated by David Thomas and contains the Arabic text alongside the English translation, together with explanatory notes. Dr Thomas' full introduction outlines the pluralist and multi-faith society of medieval Baghdad, and places Abū ʿĪsā in the context of both Muslim theological argument and Christian-Muslim discussions. In this way it demonstrates the author's originality and his influence on later Muslim authors. The book will serve as a companion to the editor's earlier volume, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"*, which was published in 1992.

DAVID THOMAS is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham. His publications include *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"* (1992), and *Syrian Christians under Islam, the First Thousand Years* (2001).

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***AL-RADD 'ALĀ AL-ITTIHĀD: AL-JUZ' AL-THĀNĪ MIN
KITĀB AL-RADD 'ALĀ AL-THALĀTH FIRAQ MIN AL-NAṢĀRĀ***
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PREFACE

Early Islamic religious thought necessarily developed in a context of encounter with other faiths, since large sectors of the population of the Islamic empire held and continued to uphold beliefs that differed from those of their rulers. There were meetings between Muslims and others at all levels of society, in many different circumstances and over many centuries, with the result that important aspects of the religious thought of Islam were deeply shaped by issues and questions introduced from outside. The surviving literature from the long years of encounter provides an excellent insight into the various preoccupations of the different sides, as well as a first-hand record of the arguments they originated in attack and defence. In addition, it provides the basis for reconstructing the development and maturing of theological expression in Islam, and for understanding the progress of society under Muslim rule with its many client communities.

An important part of this literature is devoted to encounters between Muslims and Christians. Here, more acutely than anywhere else, disagreements over fundamental perceptions of God and his relationship with the creation produced fierce debates and exerted immense pressure upon religious exponents to demonstrate the rational character and coherence of the beliefs they advocated. The outcome was a wide range of arguments and forms of explanation that in elegance and sophistication rival any others in the history of interfaith encounters.

In this extensive literature, *The Refutation of the Three Christian Sects* by the third-/ninth-century Muslim Abū 'Īsā Hārūn b. Muḥammad al-Warrāq stands out as the single most detailed, informed and comprehensive work by a Muslim against Christian doctrines from the whole early period of Islam. No rival for completeness appeared until the eighth/fourteenth century, when Ibn Taymiyya was provoked to write his *Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Maṣīḥ*. Abū 'Īsā's *Refutation* presents a detailed analysis and exposure of the central Christian teachings about the Trinity and the Incarnation as they were held by the main sects active in the early Islamic empire, known as Nestorians, Jacobites and Melkites. It is based upon a deep and wide acquaintance with Christian teachings, as thorough and scholarly as any from a Muslim we know. But it is also fuelled by a passionate concern to maintain belief in the

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dominant Muslim principle of the absolute oneness of God and his complete distinctiveness from all other forms of existence. The whole work amounts to a stringent and exhaustively full demonstration of the supposed inadequacies of Christian doctrinal formulations, and is a brilliant example of a superior though forgotten mind at the height of its powers.

A few years ago I produced an edition and translation of the first part of Abū 'Īsā's *Refutation in Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam, Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications no. 45, Cambridge, 1992), where I also brought together the known facts about Abū 'Īsā himself, and attempted to place his work in its intellectual context. At that time I did not consider it necessary to include the second part since this had been edited with a French translation by A. Abel (Brussels, 1949), and was also accessible in E. Platti's edition and French translation of the fourth-/tenth-century Jacobite Yaḥyā Ibn 'Adī's response (Louvain, 1987), in which the *Refutation* is quoted extensively and thereby preserved. But since Abel's edition is only available in a small number of duplicated copies and has mistakes in the text, and Platti's edition, though immaculate, gives the text as a series of quotations in the Christian work, where the shape and continuity of Abū 'Īsā's argument cannot be fully appreciated, I have now thought it appropriate to make an edition of the work itself, with an English translation. This has afforded the opportunity to add extra details about Abū 'Īsā's life to those given in the earlier work, though not to resolve fully the enigma of his attitude towards his own faith, and to place the *Refutation* against the background of contemporary Muslim and Christian debates about the Incarnation and the person of Christ.

In my earlier book I tried to show that by any estimation Abū 'Īsā was an unusual and exceptional scholar, and that this *Refutation* stands pre-eminent among the surviving records of Muslim–Christian encounters. My respect for him and his achievement remains undiminished, and indeed the further evidence I include in this book will hopefully strengthen this claim.

The preparation of the work has been assisted greatly by the staffs of the Orchard Learning Resources Centre, Selly Oak, Birmingham, and the Bodleian and Cambridge University Libraries, whom I gratefully thank. The Reverend Dr John Davies has read the Introduction and improved its style, while Carol Bebawi has patiently typed the English text and Susan Moore has painstakingly read through everything. I take pleasure in thanking them all for saving me from infelicities and inaccuracies. Those that undoubtedly remain result from my own oversight and lack of precision.

It is my hope that this edition and translation will make more widely available the remainder of the known extant works of a major though neglected scholar, and will contribute towards the deeper knowledge that Christians and Muslims require if they are to learn from their shared history and seek to transcend it.

David Thomas